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ROBERT OWEN—EDUCATOR

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The past often has important but neglected lessons for the present. While history never repeats itself on a large scale, the whirligig of time rushes society into epochs which even the careless student of history may recognize as possessing many of the landmarks of an earlier era. In the sphere of education, as in the social, economic, and religious world, the American people are standing face to face with a crisis. Is the work of the public-school system to be broadened and socialized, or is it to be relatively narrowed and commercialized? The epoch from 1820 to 1850 which gave birth to the American free-school system should be studied by all interested in the political and educational progress of the next two or three decades.

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the educational struggle centered around this proposition: Shall the public schools be free to all or only to pauper children? It was free versus private or "pauper" schools. Today the free-school system is an accepted institution; the controversy is now focused upon the aims and ideals of the school system. Shall education mean a broad intellectual, industrial, physical, and moral culture; or shall it connote only a narrow technical training? Shall the public school aim to develop citizens out of the boys and girls of the masses, or shall it merely fashion human machines? These are the vital educational problems of the hour; and, if we will search the records, the earlier struggle can teach some very significant lessons.

Educational progress and educational reform, like advancement in the political or the legal realm, are conditioned by industrial and social changes. The great-man theory of educational progress is as insufficient as is the great-man theory of political history. The great man in education or in politics is

"but the centralized expression of the times." He directs the social forces which are seeking expression, and thus he hastens progress. The growth of crowded population centers, of factories, and of a wage-earning class, accompanied by the unrest inevitable to a population immersed in new living and working environments, prepared the seed-plot for the successful propaganda of the theory that schools should be free and tax-supported. The real educational leaders of this formative period were in sympathy with the rising wage-earning class; and were familiar with the warp and woof of the social fabric which the steam engine and the factory were weaving. Today concentration of wealth, consolidation of industry, standardization of work, the tendency toward stratification of classes, the decay of the old apprenticeship system, and the threatened commercialization of the public-school system are preparing the ground for another educational revival and for the advent of new educational leaders who will be able to grasp the significance of the underlying social forces of the present generation.

Mr. George B. Lockwood, in a book entitled *The New Harmony Movement*¹ presents a sympathetic and possibly over-enthusiastic statement of the value of the educational principles of Robert Owen, the great English philanthropist, and of his most famous son, Robert Dale Owen. These important principles and precepts were worked out in the New Harmony Community in the last of the decade of the 20's. This community was located in Indiana, on the Wabash River about fifty-one miles above its mouth. Mr. Lockwood gives New Harmony the credit of being the great center from which radiated influences which led to the establishment and improvement of the public-school system. This writer seems to be under the influence of the great-man theory, and to overlook the fundamental importance of the marvelous industrial and social transformations which occurred in the United States between the passage of the Embargo Act and the half-way mark of the century. Nevertheless, every teacher and every student of the theory and history of education ought to read the chapters in this book which deal

¹ Appleton & Co., 1907.

with the educational principles of Owen and his collaborer, Maclure.

Robert Owen was not a teacher; he was a social reformer, a humanitarian leader, and a dreamer of Utopian dreams. This lover of humanity emphasized the idea that the individual was the product of his environment. One of his favorite mottos was: "Man does not form his own character, but it is made for him." And in Owen's opinion education should be a factor of prime importance in forming men and in modifying circumstances.

Owen's New Harmony Community was the most important of all the many Utopian communities organized on American soil. The enthusiasts who founded communities which were to be models for the big outside, unregenerate world were poor psychologists. They firmly believed that men were ruled by reason; it was not given them to look into the depths of frail human nature and to see the hidden forces which are called custom, tradition, creed, class division, and interest rivalry, which often throttle reason and bias judgment. Robert Owen and other founders and promoters of Utopias argued *a priori* that as soon as the struggling and dissatisfied world got a clear vision of life—the good life—as unfolded in the harmonious community injustice, inequality, and unhappiness would be purposively replaced by justice, equality, fraternity, and happiness; the community life would be quickly writ nation-wide and world-wide. Such was the optimistic dream of Owen; and New Harmony was its concrete realization. New Harmony was to furnish "an ideal social environment," and under these "ideal surroundings a perfect race might be developed." New Harmony was a social experiment station. Owen desired to be a social Burbank. The community did not thrive; human nature cannot, perhaps fortunately, be recast and reformed in a day or a generation. But although New Harmony as a model community was a notable failure, the influence of the ideals which found expression in this miniature and artificial world have been unconsciously felt in many directions.

In the educational scheme exemplified in the New Harmony

schools were incorporated a variety of principles and methods which have finally found, or are finding, lodgment in our public-school system. Nearly a century ago Owen advocated free and universal education. The kindergarten and the industrial school were made integral parts of his school system. He urged that classical education, so called, should not be "thrust down the throats of all its unwilling victims." The "school city" form of government was advocated. No doubt some of these commendable methods and principles were borrowed from Fellenberg of Howfyl, in whose school Robert Dale Owen was a pupil; but Owen was the first man to introduce these educational innovations into the United States. American educators have scarcely as yet reached the mark set by Owen over four score years ago.

After the collapse of the New Harmony Community in 1828, Robert Dale Owen, still under thirty years of age, went to New York City. With pen and voice he soon began to present his panacea for social ills. The ground had already been prepared, and the seed fell on fertile soil. Industrial towns and cities were springing into existence. Textile factories were beckoning to wage earners. The evils of the factory and town life were for the first time revealed in their repulsive nakedness. The frontiersman was placing the ballot in the hands of the workers, who were smarting from a feeling of injustice, subordination, poverty, and squalor. The puritanical New Englander, tinged with religious ardor, had long been proclaiming the necessity of education. Repeatedly was the worker confronted by the trite dictum: the uneducated must ever remain a degraded caste. Then at the very moment when organized labor was preparing for its first significant struggle on a large scale for justice and higher standards of living, the most uncompromising of all American educational enthusiasts thrust himself before the eager, anxious, and discontented workers with this oft-repeated slogan: "I believe in a National System of Equal, Republican, Protective, Practical Education, the sole regenerator of a profligate age and the only redeemer of our suffering country from the equal curses of chilling poverty and corrupting riches, of gnawing want and destroying debauchery, of blind ignorance and of unprincipled

intrigue. By this, my creed, I will live. By my consistency with this, my professed belief, I claim to be judged. By it I will stand or fall." Thus did Robert Dale Owen, animated by the faith of his father, sound a cry which was echoed in almost every workingmen's meeting from Boston to Charleston. In those eventful years, 1829, 1830 and 1831, of the first organized agitation by American workingmen, an impetus was given to the movement for free and universal education which led directly to the general adoption of the free-school system. The American public-school system owes much to Robert Dale Owen, to his father, and to New Harmony.

The American people have been prone to adopt watchwords and shibboleths, and to accept the passionate plea of almost any ardent and able reformer of the single-trait variety. Many Americans have rallied around the banners of manhood suffrage, free homesteads, free silver, and socialism, implicitly believing that the panacea for all social and economic ills had at last been discovered in one of the reforms mentioned above. But the most persistent of all American social slogans has been: free public education for all children. Many Americans have looked and are still looking to the public schools as the rock upon which American citizenship and American institutions rest. More Americans have marched under the banner of the free school than have followed the leaders who raised standards on which were inscribed free homesteads or free silver. The two Owens must be given high rank among the enthusiastic leaders of the free-school movement.

Why should we of today study the work and the educational principles of the sage of New Harmony? This is the answer: Robert Owen and Robert Dale Owen were men who caught a glimpse of the significance of the social changes of the early portion of the nineteenth century. They were permeated with the spirit of modern democracy—a spirit whose existence the steam engine made possible. The men and women who are to be educational leaders in the twentieth century must learn of Owen; and, in addition, they must be diligent students of history and of industrial evolution. Educational precepts and traditions

formulated in days gone by do not meet the demands of today when a new balance of social forces obtains.

The school is broadening its scope; educational ideals are changing. Is the school of the near future to approximate the factory or the studio? Will all pupils be unwillingly crowded into a common mold in large classrooms directed by central office red tape? Or, will the individuality of students and teachers be duly and carefully considered? The educational leader of the next decade will be the man or woman who successfully stems the tide which is running toward the standardization of the output of the American public-school system.

The Owen of the next decade will not say, "I believe in equal, practical, republican education"; he will assert, "I believe in training men and women to make a living and also to live, to enjoy, and to resist oppression." The educational leader of the next decade must, like Owen in the past century, be in sympathy with the overworked and the underpaid. He will not, like the latter, be a Utopian dreamer, but a student of individual and social psychology. The Owen of the next decade, like his prototype, will not be a stickler for educational precepts and methods learned in his youth. Owen was an educational radical; but a period of educational transition demands the innovator and the radical. Today the radical is needed, not the erratic and eccentric radical but the radical who thoughtfully and dispassionately appeals to psychology and to industrial evolution. In educational radicalism of this type lies the hope of the future.